

# What Can Parents and Teachers Do If an Adolescent Begins to Fail in School?

By Anne S. Robertson

*Many teenagers experience times when keeping up with schoolwork is difficult. These periods may last for several weeks and may result in social problems as well as a decline in academic performance. Some adolescents get through these difficult times with minimal assistance from their parents or teachers. It may be enough for parents to listen to the teenager's problems and suggest coping strategies, provide a supportive home environment, and encourage the teenager's participation in extracurricular school activities. However, when the difficulties last longer than a single grading period or are linked to a long-term pattern of poor school performance or problematic behaviors, parents and teachers may need to intervene. This brochure identifies some characteristics of adolescents at risk for failing in school and offers advice on how parents and teachers can assist them.*

## How Can We Identify Students Who Are at Risk for Failure?

Some students may exhibit at-risk behaviors from the early elementary school years on; others may overcome early difficulties but could experience related problems during the middle or high school years. Still others may not exhibit at-risk behaviors until early adolescence. Research suggests that problems are more likely to occur during a transitional year, such as when a student is moving from elementary to middle school or from middle school to high school (Baker and Sansone, 1990; Pantleo, 1992).

To intervene effectively, parents and teachers need to know some common characteristics of adolescents at risk for school failure. These characteristics include:

**Attention problems.** The student has a history of attention issues at school.

**Poor grades.** The student consistently performs at barely average or below average levels.

**Retentions.** The student has been retained in one or more grade levels.

**Absenteeism.** The student is absent five or more days per term.

**Lack of connection with school and community activities.** The student is not involved in sports, music, scouting, or other extracurricular activities.

**Behavior problems.** The student may be disciplined frequently in school or may show a sudden change in school behavior, such as withdrawing from classroom discussions.

**Lack of confidence.** The student believes that success is linked to natural intelligence rather than to hard work and that his or her own ability is insufficient and cannot be changed or improved.

**Limited goals for the future.** The student seems unaware of what career options are available or of how to attain those goals.

When an adolescent exhibits more than one of these characteristics, he or she will likely need assistance from parents and teachers if he or she is to be successful in school. Girls and students from culturally or linguistically diverse groups may be especially at risk for academic failure if they exhibit these behaviors (Steinberg, 1996; Debold, 1995). If parents and teachers step back and let these students "figure it out" or "take responsibility for their own learning," this may lead to a deeper cycle of failure at school.

## What Role Does Parenting Style Play?

Parenting style may affect a child's school behavior. Many experts distinguish among permissive, authoritarian, and authoritative parenting styles (Baumrind, 1991). These parenting styles are associated with different combinations of warmth and support, and limit-setting and supervision for children. The permissive style tends to emphasize warmth and support, and the authoritarian style tends to emphasize limit-setting and supervision. The authoritative style offers a combination of both warmth and support and limit-setting and supervision, and it has been identified as the parenting style that is more likely to encourage

academic success in adolescents. Authoritative parents are warm and responsive but are also able to establish and enforce standards for their children's behavior, to monitor conduct, and to encourage communication. Authoritative parents make it clear that they expect responsible behavior from their children and that they are available to support their children as needed (Glasgow and others, 1997).

### **How Can Parents and Teachers Respond?**

Parents often feel uncertain about how to approach their adolescent or the school when their teenager seems to be having difficulty. However, it is important to remember that adolescents need their parents not only to set appropriate expectations and boundaries, but also to advocate for them. Teachers can ease parents' concerns by including the parents as part of the student's educational support team. When an adolescent is having difficulty, parents and teachers can assist by:

- Making time to listen to the teenager's fears or concerns and trying to understand them.
  - Setting appropriate boundaries for behavior that are consistently enforced.
  - Emphasizing the importance of study skills, hard work, and follow-through at home and in school.
  - Arranging tutoring or study group support for the teenager at the school or in the community through organizations such as the local YMCA or a local college or university.
  - Providing a supportive home and school environment in which education is clearly valued.
  - Encouraging the teenager to participate in one or more school activities.
  - Becoming more involved in school activities by attending school functions, such as sporting events, concerts, science fairs, and plays, to show their support for the school.
  - Meeting as a team with the student and a school counselor to share their expectations for the teenager's future and to figure out how they can support his or her learning environment.
- Helping the teenager think about career options by arranging for visits to local companies and colleges, providing information about careers and vocational or college courses, and encouraging the teenager to participate in an internship or a career-oriented part-time job.
  - Encouraging the teenager to volunteer in the community or to participate in community groups such as the YMCA, scouting, 4-H, religious organizations, or other service-oriented groups to provide an out-of-school support system.

### **Conclusion**

Understanding the factors that may put an adolescent at risk for academic failure can help parents and teachers to determine if a student is in need of extra help or support. Being aware of common problems can help parents and teachers know when it is important to reach out to the student before a "difficult time" develops into a more serious situation.

### **Where Can I Get More Information?**

The following organizations offer information about at-risk students and about elementary and early childhood education:

#### **ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education**

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign  
Children's Research Center  
51 Gerty Drive  
Champaign, IL 61820-7469  
Phone: 217-333-1386, Toll Free: 800-583-4135  
Fax: 217-333-3767  
E-mail: [ericeece@uiuc.edu](mailto:ericeece@uiuc.edu)  
Web: <http://www.ericeece.org>

#### **NPIN Web: <http://www.npin.org> (National Parent Information Network)**

National Clearinghouse on Families and Youth  
P.O. Box 13505  
Silver Spring, MD 20911-3505  
Phone: 301-608-8098  
Fax: 301-608-8721  
E-mail: [info@ncfy.com](mailto:info@ncfy.com)  
Web: <http://www.ncfy.com>

**National Middle School Association**  
2600 Corporate Exchange Drive, Suite 370  
Columbus, OH 43231  
Toll Free: 800-528-NMSA (6672)  
Phone: 614-895-4730  
Fax: 614-895-4750  
Web: <http://www.nmsa.org>

## Sources

References identified with EJ or ED are abstracted in the ERIC database. EJ references are journal articles available at most research libraries. ED references are documents available in microfiche collections at more than 900 locations or in paper copy and, in some cases, electronically from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service at 1-800-443-ERIC (3742). Call 1-800-LET-ERIC (538-3742) for more details.

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Debold, E. 1995. "Helping Girls Survive the Middle Grades." *Principal* 74 (3): 22-24. EJ 496 198.

George, C. 1993. *Beyond Retention. A Study of Retention Rates, Practices, and Successful Alternatives in California. Summary Report.* Sacramento, CA: California State Department of Education. ED 365 005.

Glasgow, K. L., S. M. Dornbusch, L. Troyer, L. Steinberg, and P. L. Ritter. 1997. "Parenting Styles, Adolescents' Attributions, and Educational Outcomes in Nine Heterogeneous High Schools." *Child Development* 68 (3): 507-29. EJ 549 525.

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Jacobsen, T., and V. Hofmann. 1997. "Children's Attachment Representations: Longitudinal Relations to School Behavior and Academic Competency in Middle Childhood and Adolescence." *Developmental Psychology* 33 (4): 703-10. EJ 549 597.

O'Sullivan, R. G. 1989. *Identifying Students for Participation in a Model Middle School Dropout Prevention Program.* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, March 27-April 1. ED 305 170.

Pantleo, S. J. 1992. *Program To Reduce Failure Rates of Ninth Grade Students.* Fort Lauderdale, FL: Nova University. ED 358 391.

Siegel, J. 1996. "Schools That Work: A Second Chance for Success." *Electronic Learning* 16 (1): 48-51, 67.

Steinberg, L. 1996. "Ethnicity and Adolescent Achievement." *American Educator* 20 (2): 28-35. EJ 531 782

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